

The Gülen Movement in London and the Politics of Public Engagement:  
Producing 'good Islam' before and after July 15th

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Abstract

Since the failed coup of 15 July 2016, for which it is held responsible, the Gülen Movement (GM) has been in crisis. With no foreseeable future in its homeland, the GM is now tasked with regrouping abroad. This article investigates the GM in London, a city that, for various reasons, is likely to become a significant centre for Gülenist activity in the post-coup era. Taking the Dialogue Society (DS) as its focus, it investigates the prospects of the GM's survival by analyzing its activities, both before and after the coup, in light of Mamdani's<sup>1</sup> discussion of 'good' and 'bad' Muslims in the post-9/11 world. The article shows how the GM has established itself as a voice of 'good' Islam in the context of British debates on Islam and radicalization. It suggests that the public presence the GM has established for itself through its public engagement activities in the UK could constitute a central part of its fight back against President Erdoğan, and be catalytic to its creation of a dynamic future in exile.

Keywords: failed coup, Dialogue Society, public relations, strategic, London, 'good Islam'

The dramatic events of 15 July 2016 in Turkey took the country, and the world, by surprise. Official statistics reported that 265 civilians were killed and more than two thousand seriously injured in a now much-discussed attempt at a military coup.<sup>2</sup> This was the bloodiest coup attempt in modern Turkish history, surpassing the coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980 in the loss of life that it unleashed. Despite public denials from Fethullah Gülen and the skepticism of some Western media,<sup>3</sup> there is now ample evidence to suggest that the Gülen Movement (GM) was central to its planning and execution.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, "Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: A Political Perspective on Culture and Terrorism." *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (2002): 766–75.

<sup>2</sup> Berk Esen and Sebnem Gumuscu. "Turkey: How the Coup Failed." *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (January 2017): 59–73. See also Hakan M. Yavuz and Bayram Balci, eds. *Turkey's July 15th Coup and the Gülen Movement*. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/opinion/fethullah-gulen-i-condemn-all-threats-to-turkeys-democracy.html> (accessed 31 January 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Journalist Sedat Ergin, writing for *Hürriyet Daily News*, has extensively investigated and reported on the evidence for the GM having played a pivotal role in the coup attempt. See the archive of his work in English at

During its heyday in the 2000s and early 2010s, the GM was the most powerful and affluent religious group in Turkey. It ran a lucrative global network of schools and universities, financial institutions, private hospitals and other businesses with a total net worth in the tens of billions of dollars. During this time, the GM maintained a pragmatic working relationship with the AKP government, based on a shared commitment to its conservative socio-religious agenda as well as an eye for the accumulation of material wealth and power. However, the alliance began to show signs of strain during the AKP's third term in office (2011-15). After an incremental demise, it publically collapsed in December 2013 when the GM launched a direct challenge to then-Prime Minister Erdoğan, attempting to smear him and his close allies with a raft of serious corruption allegations. The challenge was not successful: although damaged, the prime minister remained in office, vowing thereafter to punish the GM for its apparent act of treachery. Over the following two and a half years, senior Gülenists were routinely arrested in Turkey and in May 2015 a major GM asset, Bank Asya, became the first of the movement's institutions to be forcibly taken over by the state.

When news of the coup attempt broke on the night of 15 July 2016, Erdoğan immediately declared Gülen to be its mastermind. Since then, the GM in Turkey has been completely dismantled, and its considerable financial assets there have been frozen. Its schools – estimated to have numbered around 1,000 – have all been closed down, taken into state control, or in some extreme case vandalized by angry anti-GM mobs. The principal mouthpiece of the GM in Turkey, the

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<http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/opinion/sedat-ergin/>. See also Esen and Gumuscu op. cit. and the postscript to Yavuz and Balcı op. cit. for further articulation of the case against the GM, along with Ayşe Zarakol, "The Failed Coup in Turkey: What We Know so Far." *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo*, no. 433 (July 2016). The matter is, nonetheless, far from resolved: for a list of scholars and observers who dispute this explanation of events, see the note 83 of the 2016 UK Parliamentary report on Fethullah Gülen and the Hizmet Movement, available at <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/uks-relations-with-turkey/written/42795.pdf> (accessed 1 February 2018).

Journalists' and Writers' Foundation (Gazeteciler ve Yazarlar Vakfı, GYV) was immediately closed down after the coup, and its staff have been either imprisoned or forced into hiding or exile. The major media outlets that the movement ran, including the Zaman newspaper group, have been shut and its editorial staff arrested. The movement is not the only victim of the government's media clampdown, or indeed of its sweeping purge of state employees. Over 135,000 have now been sacked or reassigned, and not all of these people were associated (even indirectly) with Gülen.<sup>5</sup>

Alongside the structural dismantling of the GM's activities in Turkey since the attempted coup, public opinion has also turned comprehensively against Gülen. An opinion poll taken in the immediate aftermath showed that 65% of Turkish citizens believed him to be responsible for the failed putsch.<sup>6</sup> Since that time, although there have been repeated criticisms of the government's heavy handed crackdown (namely from the opposition CHP), there have been no serious public defenses of Gülen within Turkey. This situation marks a radical departure from the 2000s and early 2010s, when the GM commanded a considerable amount of domestic support. Many groups, including leftists and liberal intelligentsia, endorsed the GM while it was allied with the government in the first two terms of the AKP's tenure. During this time, the AKP was widely applauded for its stated intentions to loosen some of the constraints of strict Kemalism in order (ostensibly) to fully consolidate the democratic process, and also to stabilize and develop the Turkish economy. In the same vein, government supporters and secularists alike applauded the GM for its modernizing, pro-western stance, including its contributions to education and its upwardly mobile approach to industry and entrepreneurship.

The tide of public opinion began to turn against the GM at approximately the same time that its relationship with the AKP publically deteriorated. The

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<sup>5</sup> Schenkkan quotes Turkish human rights monitoring group iHop as stating that 31% of those detained in the purges to date were associated with Kurdish or leftist groups. Nate Schenkkan, "The Remarkable Scale of Turkey's 'Global Purge.'" *Foreign Affairs*, January 29, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/13/magazine/inside-turkeys-purge.html>

corruption allegations that Gülenist prosecutors launched against Erdoğan and his close allies at the end of 2013 relied entirely upon the illegal wire-tapping of private telephone conversations, and while the contents of the conversations were scandalous, there was no doubt they had been obtained through entirely illicit means. The movement had taken a gamble, assuming that the material would be shocking enough to seriously weaken the president's position, and that an indignant public would overlook the illegality of its sources. The gamble backfired: the president remained in position, and the GM itself hemorrhaged vital credibility.

The movement lost further support because of the controversial role it played in the Balyoz and Ergenekon trials, which culminated in 2012 and 2013 respectively. At their conclusion, hundreds of military officers and journalists as well as politicians and academics were found guilty of plotting to violently overthrow the democratic order, and sentenced to lengthy spells in prison. The evidence used against them was later found to have been fabricated, and the sentences of those convicted were overturned pending retrials. The Gülenists within the judiciary who had prosecuted the cases were widely condemned, accused of having acted nefariously in order to purge the secular establishment of their own rivals and enemies.<sup>7</sup> By the time the coup attempt was launched on 15 July 2016, it was therefore commonly known that the GM had a history of abusing power in its homeland and engaging in illegal and anti-democratic activities,<sup>8</sup> and this largely accounts for the absence of independent voices in Turkey seeking to defend Gülen and his followers today.

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<sup>7</sup> Osman Can, 'The Structural Causes of Political Crisis in Turkey', *Insight Turkey* 16, no 2 (2014): 33-41.

<sup>8</sup> For this reason, the GM can be identified as a significant contributor to the backsliding of democracy in Turkey and the transformation of Turkish politics along authoritarian lines. See Esen and Gumuscu, op.cit. See also Ergun Özbudun, 'AKP at the Crossroads: Erdoğan's Majoritarian Drift.' *South European Society and Politics* 19, no. 2 (2014): 155-67, and Murat Somer, 'Understanding Turkey's Democratic Breakdown: Old vs. New and Indigenous vs. Global Authoritarianism.' *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 16, no. 4 (2016): 481-503.

### ***THE GM IN EXILE SINCE THE COUP***

Since 15 July, significant numbers of GM affiliates (as well as opposition supporters and many others fleeing the purges) have left Turkey and are now living in international exile. The period since the coup has seen the movement in crisis, seeking to defend itself against the allegations of criminal activity that it faces in Turkey, as well as to stem the flow of material losses that it has incurred both at home and abroad.<sup>9</sup> Although the GM has been fully globalized since the very early 2000s, its activities and the organization and movement of its people have always revolved closely around its Turkish homeland. With access to that homeland cut off, in order to have any kind of future, the GM needs to recreate itself as a global diaspora movement operating entirely in international space.

Since Gülen's move to the USA in 1999, his followers have invested heavily in public relations activities, and have focused on promoting Gülen's interests to strategic global audiences. Two major Gülenist organizations in Western countries were established in 1999: the Rumi Forum in Washington DC, and the Dialogue Society in London. These organizations have played a central role in Gülenist PR over nearly two decades, and have secured for the movement a carefully constructed audience of influential supporters and sympathizers in two key western capital cities. Unlike at home in Turkey, where support for the GM has evaporated over recent years, the support of this international group of GM sympathizers appears to still be largely intact.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that, as the GM negotiates a new global future for itself in the face of fierce hostility from Turkey, the endorsement of this international support base will prove significant.

In what follows, I analyze the activities of the Dialogue Society in London in order to understand the nature of Gülenist PR, both before and since the coup, and probe the reasons for the appeal it seems to hold to a particular Western

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<sup>9</sup> A transnational witch-hunt targeting senior GM affiliates is currently being carried out by the Turkish government, and has seen arrests and extraditions of individuals as well as school closures in an estimated 46 countries. See Schenkan, op.cit.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, "Talking with the 'Religious Terrorist' That Turkey Wants Trump to Extradite." *Religion Dispatches*, January 12, 2017.

audience. In deconstructing the GM's engagement with strategic individuals in a Western center of power, I seek primarily to shed light on the future prospects of the GM as a global enterprise. In doing so, I also interrogate the securitized narratives surrounding Islam that continue to dominate the post-9/11 world, which have undoubtedly had an effect on the way in which the GM is received in the UK and other Western countries.

The movement's British branch has been, to date, considerably smaller than its counterpart in either the USA, where Gülen himself is located, or indeed Germany, where there are higher numbers of migrants from Turkey.<sup>11</sup> The British GM is, however, likely to become increasingly significant as a center for the movement in exile. With Gülen's extradition case becoming a serious sticking point in Turkish-US relations, the USA – previously the GM's major center outside Turkey – is less attractive to GM affiliates than it was previously. The UK capital could offer a strategic alternative. In April 2017 the Home Office publically announced that, in light of the purges underway in Turkey, personal association with Gülen could be sufficient grounds for Turkish citizens to apply for asylum.<sup>12</sup> With a number of senior Gülenists already resident in Britain, it is feasible that London, a global, multi-cultural city where Turkish communities are generally well integrated and accepted, might become a new focus of GM activity in exile.

### ***AFTER 9/11 AND 7/7 IN THE UNITED KINGDOM***

The following analysis of the GM and its international presence needs to start by recognizing the paradigm shift that took place viz-a-viz Islam and its relationship with the West on 11 September 2001. Since that time, cultural and political climates in Western nations have been colored by anxieties about radical Islam and in the UK, these concerns increased after further al-Qaeda terror attacks in central London on 7 July 2005. In response to these two sets of attacks, Samuel

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<sup>11</sup> There are approximately 250,000 people of Turkish/Turkish-Kurdish origin living in the UK, while in Germany there are estimated to be at least 4 million.

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[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/607266/CPIN\\_-\\_Turkey\\_-\\_Gulenists\\_-\\_v1.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/607266/CPIN_-_Turkey_-_Gulenists_-_v1.pdf) (accessed 31 January 2018).

Huntingdon's 'clash of civilizations' thesis has been widely invoked, offering an explanation for the tragedy that posited Islam as the perennial enemy of Western societies.<sup>13</sup> This narrative, which has been debunked,<sup>14</sup> presents Islam as a static and essential category, unaffected by time, location or circumstance. As such, it continues the reductionist stereotypes of Islamic societies that Edward Said identified in *Orientalism*.<sup>15</sup> In designating Islam as uniformly 'pre-modern', proponents of the clash of civilizations thesis see Muslims neither as co-participants in the modern world, nor as independent social, cultural and political agents.

Derivative explanations have looked beyond a clash between Islam and the West and posited a schism within Islam itself, drawing a distinction between a minority of rogue extremists who exist in contradistinction to the 'true' Muslim mainstream. Mahmood Mamdani observed this in a seminal article of 2002:

Certainly, we are now told to distinguish between good Muslims and bad Muslims. [...] We are told that there is a fault line running through Islam, a line that separates moderate Islam, called 'genuine Islam', from extremist political Islam. The terrorists of September 11, we are told, did not just hijack planes, they also hijacked Islam, meaning 'genuine' Islam.<sup>16</sup>

'Good' and 'genuine' Muslims are those who live peaceably and according to the law, and who integrate within secular western nations. 'Bad Muslims' are those who reject the pluralistic values of those nations and commit acts of violence against them. These binary categories were in fact established long before the current 'War on Terror'. They were present during colonial encounters in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, where Muslims who cooperated with colonizing

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<sup>13</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22-49.

<sup>14</sup> Hasan Azad, "Do Muslims Belong in the West? An Interview with Talal Asad." *Jadaliyya*, February 3, 2015. See also Olivier Roy, *Globalized Islam: The Search for a New Ummah*. Hurst and Company, 2004.

<sup>15</sup> Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978.

<sup>16</sup> Mamdani, op. cit., p.767-8. A fuller application of Mamdani's work to the GM case is given by Hendrick in Yavuz and Balci, op.cit.

powers were legitimised and accepted, and those who did not were denigrated as dangerous and subversive.<sup>17</sup>

In Britain, the implementation of this narrative in the 21<sup>st</sup> century context could be clearly seen in the response of Prime Minister Tony Blair to the al-Qaeda inspired terrorist attacks carried out in central London on 7 July 2005. The attacks of 7/7, as they became known, were the first coordinated jihadi offensives in the UK and, significantly, they were not executed by foreign nationals but by British-born attackers. In his speech to Parliament four days later, Blair addressed the British Muslim community directly, saying:

We were proud of your contribution to Britain before last Thursday. We remain proud of it today. Fanaticism is not a state of religion but a state of mind. We will work with you to make the moderate and true voice of Islam heard as it should be.<sup>18</sup>

These attempts by a non-Muslim, British politician, and many others besides him, to define what constitutes the 'true voice of Islam' have unsurprisingly been met with scepticism by many within the Muslim community. Notwithstanding the immediate problems that arise from using the term 'moderate' (namely, the offensive implication that 'moderate' Muslims are less religiously observant than 'full' Muslims), there are considerable ontological challenges inherent in making declarations of theological normativity in Islam from an outsider perspective. At the time of the 7/7 attacks, Britain's largest Muslim organization, the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB) stood with the government, but in the intervening years the relationship between the two has become strained.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Reynolds, "Good and Bad Muslims: Islam and Indirect Rule in Northern Nigeria." *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 34, no. 3 (2001): 601–18.

<sup>18</sup> Tony Blair's Statement to MPs, Monday 11 July 2005: <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/jul/11/uksecurity.terrorism> (accessed 31 October 2017).

<sup>19</sup> See 'No one to talk to: a Muslim group falls from favour' in *The Economist*, 18 October 2014. See also Sarfraz Mansoor, 'Can we drop the term 'moderate Muslim'? It's meaningless' in *The Guardian*, 16 March 2015. Different dimensions of the 'moderate Muslim' paradigm, and the responses of British Muslim communities to it, are discussed by: Jonathan Birt, "Good Imam, Bad Imam: Civic



Nonetheless, public narratives surrounding Islam in the UK have continued to support this false dichotomy, and they retain a good deal of political traction. A clear example is Quilliam, a London-based think tank that was launched in 2008 and supported at the time by central government funds. Quilliam claims to be ‘the world’s first counter-extremism organization’ and aspires to empower ‘moderate’ Muslim voices. Its three founders, Maajid Nawaaz, Ed Husain and Rashad Ali, are all previous members of the violent political Islamic group Hizb ut-Tahrir, and now advocates for peace. Quilliam serves an important purpose in the British government’s endeavor to combat radicalization, providing a public counter-narrative from ex-extremists themselves. It navigates a difficult path between the establishment and British Muslim communities, from whom it has attracted sustained criticism.<sup>20</sup> What Quilliam demonstrates, and the reason I involve it here, is that there is clearly an appetite within the British establishment for public representations of Islam that embrace liberal democratic values, and support the binary dichotomization of Muslims into ‘moderates’ and ‘extremists’. It is this same appetite that the GM has also fed in recent years, in ways that I will now address.

### ***THE GÜLEN MOVEMENT IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: THE DIALOGUE SOCIETY***

The GM has been present in the UK since the mid-1990s and, as is typical, its activities there are dominated by education and intercultural dialogue.<sup>21</sup> With

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Religion and National Integration in Britain Post-9/11.” *The Muslim World* 96, no. 4 (2006): 687–705; Katherine Brown, “The Promise and Perils of Women’s Participation in UK Mosques: The Impact of Securitisation Agendas on Identity, Gender and Community.” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 10, no. 3 (2008): 472–91; Sean McLoughlin, “The State, ‘New’ Muslim Leaderships and Islam as a ‘Resource’ for Engagement in Britain.” In *European Muslims and the Secular State*, edited by Jocelyne Cesari and Sean McLoughlin. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005: 55–69.

<sup>20</sup> Sayeeda Warsi, *The Enemy Within: A Tale of Muslim Britain*. London: Penguin UK, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> There is, to date, no critical scholarship on the GM in the United Kingdom. A 2014 study produced by Sanaa El-Banna was published by a GM publishing house, Blue Dome Press, and therefore lacks critical distance from its subject. A 2015 chapter by Paul Weller on the movement in the UK provides a useful overview of the movement’s activities but is also positioned in favour of Gülen in

respect to public relations, the most significant organization that the GM runs in the UK is the Dialogue Society (DS). The DS has representatives across the country, although its main activities take place in the capital. It was established in 1999, the same year that Gülen fled Turkey for the USA and his followers established their other major international public relations platform, the Rumi Forum in Washington D.C. As such, serendipitous timing has allowed the movement to capitalize on a pivotal moment in the political history of the West and its relations with Muslims: in the early post-2001 era, the GM was already well established and effectively positioned to engage strategic audiences on debates surrounding Islam and its relationship with the West. Gülen could not, of course, have foreseen the dramatic turn of events that would occur in 2001, but it is important that, as of two years previously, he and his followers were already taking steps to increase their investment in public relations in Western capital cities.

The term ‘dialogue’ in the GM context has been discussed elsewhere in the literature,<sup>22</sup> and it is not my intention to analyse its meaning and application again here. Suffice to say, the focus of institutions such as the DS is not inter-faith debate. Although its activities and publications are inflected with a greater interest in Islam than in other religions, the general tenor of the DS in its *public* activities is not openly religious.<sup>23</sup> Rather, it addresses questions to do with pluralism and peaceful coexistence in mostly secular language, and claims to stand for ‘democracy, human rights, the non-instrumentalization of religion in

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its analysis. See Gürkhan Çelik, Johan Leman, and Karel Steenbrink, eds. *Gülen-Inspired Hizmet in Europe: The Western Journey of a Turkish Muslim Movement*. Brussels: Peter Lang, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Caroline Tee, *The Gülen Movement in Turkey: The Politics of Islam and Modernity*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2016; Hakan M. Yavuz, *Toward an Islamic Enlightenment: The Gülen Movement*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

<sup>23</sup> It is likely, however, that the internal activities of the DS are heavily inflected by Islam. I have not had the opportunity to carry out sustained participant observation within the DS, but on visiting its (now closed) offices in north London in 2014, I noticed the presence of a large, dedicated prayer room stocked with an array of religious texts.

politics, equality and freedom of speech'.<sup>24</sup> To these ends, the DS is active in academic research and advocacy, and publishes peer-reviewed articles in an in-house journal, *Journal of Dialogue Studies*.

The DS serves as a hub for the targeted promotion of Gülen and the GM to a specific strategic audience in London. This audience is comprised of politicians, academics, (non-Muslim) faith leaders and local dignitaries, and it is invited to consume a very particular narrative about the GM in a variety of different ways. In the analysis that follows, I focus on two major public events that the DS organised in London between 2007 and 2014. In each case, the invited audience included high profile individuals, and the event took place in a prestigious location inscribed with cultural and/or political significance.

Social scientists studying the urban landscape have drawn attention to the ways in which human beings make “use of the material world for political effect”.<sup>25</sup> This observation often describes architectural strategies employed by particular political regimes, whereby specific buildings and material sites are constructed in a way that reflects a dominant national ideology. Differently from this, I want to draw attention here to the ways in which the GM as a transnational organisation has appropriated existing symbolic geographies in a foreign country. It has done this in parallel with the recruitment of influential sympathisers and in both cases has capitalized on a kind of ‘deflected legitimacy’ that has furthered its cause amongst observers. As such, the GM in London has utilized the potency of specific material spaces that are inscribed with political and/or cultural significance as a powerful aid to the transmission of its public relations message.

### ***LONDON CONFERENCE: MUSLIM WORLD IN TRANSITION***

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<sup>24</sup> <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/about-us.html> (accessed 1 November 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Chandra Mukerji, “The Territorial State as a Figured World of Power: Strategies, Logistics, and Impersonal Rule.” *Sociological Theory* 28 (2010): 402–24.

In the 2000s, the GM facilitated numerous conferences in Western countries that purported to study the movement itself, and which were often hosted by major universities. Full funding was usually freely available to contributors, and the events were generally more lavish than the average academic meeting.<sup>26</sup> The significant financial investment that the GM made in these events is indicative of its interest in securing the endorsement (implicit, through attendance, or explicit, through later pro-Gülen publications) of the invited, and subsidized, academics. The meetings yielded edited collections of conference proceedings that were then distributed through academic networks, and they formed the bedrock of a burgeoning literature on the GM that was heavily influenced by insider perspectives.<sup>27</sup> Contributors to this literature generally fell into two categories: (1) Turkish academics who were affiliated with the movement; (2) Western academics who were well regarded in their own fields, but who very often had little specialist knowledge of Turkey or the complexities of the GM's stature in its homeland. As a result, the GM has overseen the construction of a body of literature that ostensibly provides legitimate scholarly analysis of its aims and objectives, but which in fact has been heavily biased towards the movement.<sup>28</sup>

In October 2007, the DS organized a large conference in London, the objectives of which it summarized in retrospect as follows:

The underlying aim of the conference was to examine the impact of the Gülen movement on the contemporary Muslim world in transition and the relations between the West and Islam in general. The Gülen movement aims to promote creative and positive relations between the West and the Muslim world and articulate a constructive position

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<sup>26</sup> See Joshua Hendrick's introduction in *Gülen*, in which he describes his first encounter with the movement at such a conference.

<sup>27</sup> David Tittensor, "Secrecy and Hierarchy within the Gülen Movement and the Question of Academic Responsibility." In Yavuz and Balcı, op. cit.

<sup>28</sup> Examples include: Tamer Balcı and Christopher L. Miller, eds. *The Gülen Hizmet Movement: Circumspect Activism in Faith-Based Reform*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars, 2012. See also, Greg Barton, Paul Weller, and İhsan Yılmaz, eds. *The Muslim World and Politics in Transition: Creative Contributions of the Gülen Movement*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013.

on issues such as democracy, multiculturalism, globalisation, and interfaith dialogue in the context of secular modernity.<sup>29</sup>

The conference was launched at the House of Lords in Westminster, the center of British political life and, as the oldest seat of democratic governance in the world, a highly symbolic location. By publicly expressing its commitment to democracy and multiculturalism in this strategic geographical space, the GM's message acquired considerable heft and gained valuable PR leverage.

The launch event was hosted by Lord (Nazir) Ahmed, who was, at the time, a high-profile peer and member of the Labour Party,<sup>30</sup> and it was attended by numerous other politicians and public figures including Jack Straw, former Foreign Secretary and Bill Rammell, Minister of State for Education and Skills. The conference was held at two major London universities, SOAS (University of London) and the London School of Economics (LSE). By organizing the event in these distinguished institutions, and hosting high profile guests, the GM achieved a kind of 'legitimacy by association'. British political grandees such as Lord Ahmed are unlikely to have been well informed about the origins of the GM, or its complex relationship with political power in Turkey. His presence at a public promotional event facilitated by the GM did, however, offer public approval and highly strategic endorsement to the global GM in front of an influential audience. This is a key aspect of its PR strategy, and one that manifests time and again in the movement's public engagement events.

Papers at the conference addressed many different facets of the GM, although none of them applied a critical or self-reflexive analysis of the movement's evident accrual of both political and material power. Instead, topics included the GM's transnational nature, its rationale for economic enterprise, its educational philosophy, and Gülen's teachings on non-violence, humanitarianism and civic

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.dialoguesociety.org/discussion-forums/63-muslim-world-in-transition-contributions-of-the-guelen-movement.html#.WfngFK2cZTY> (accessed 1 November 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Lord Ahmed has since been suspended from the Labour Party for reasons unconnected to the present discussion.

participation.<sup>31</sup> There were also various attempts to analyse Gülen in the context of the Sufi tradition on which he draws in many of his writings. For example, Y. Alp Aslandoğan, who is one of the most senior members of Gülen's inner circle, gave a paper entitled 'Present and Potential Impact of the Spiritual Tradition of Islam on Contemporary Muslims: From Ghazali to Gülen', in which he set out to 'present an analysis of [the] 'balanced' spiritual tradition in Islam, from Ghazali, through Rumi, to Gülen.'<sup>32</sup>

There is evident hyperbole in equating Gülen to these giants of the Islamic intellectual tradition. While not all papers at the conference engaged in such excessive adulation, nonetheless, they all adopted a broadly sympathetic perspective on the GM and in doing so they gave the movement their implicit endorsement. I make this observation not to cast aspersions on the international scholars who participated in the 2007 conference, some of whom have since expressed regret at being included. Rather, I use it to illustrate the climate within which the GM was working in the UK in 2007, only two years after the attacks of 7/7. In that climate, as in many ways today, parts of the British establishment and society at large were extremely amenable to hearing the message of Muslim liberalism, pacifism and progress that is attributed to Gülen. Through events such as the 2007 London conference, the movement successfully capitalised on this opportunity.

### ***FILM PREMIERE: LOVE IS A VERB***

A similar example of Gülenist PR took place in November 2014. This time, the focus was a lavish premiere for a documentary film that the movement had produced, entitled *Love is a Verb*. This film appeared within a year of the public degeneration of relations between the GM and Turkey's AK Party, which had come about with the December 2013 corruption scandals. In the wake of that

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<sup>31</sup> Contributions were published in Louis J. Cantori, Marcia K. Hermansen, and David B. Capes, eds. *Muslim World in Transition: Contributions of the Gülen Movement*. Leeds: Leeds Metropolitan University Press, 2007.

<sup>32</sup> <https://fgulen.com/en/gulen-movement/conference-papers/contributions-of-the-gulen-movement/25903-present-and-potential-impact-of-the-spiritual-tradition-of-islam-on-contemporary-muslims-from-ghazali-to-gulen> (accessed 3 November 2017).

episode, Erdoğan officially designated the movement a terrorist organisation and began the task of dismantling its assets in Turkey.<sup>33</sup> The release of *Love is a Verb* therefore marked an important part of the movement's counter-offensive, and showed that the movement was adept at fighting back using international PR as an effective weapon.

The premiere was held at a cinema on Leicester Square in central London, an iconic location for British film and television, and the most prestigious location for such a screening in the UK. Major film premieres are often held in Leicester Square, and it is home to a number of nationally prominent cinemas. The choice of venue is further indication that the GM has deployed significant financial resources in the pursuit of public relations successes, and that – as with the event at the House of Lords – it has been adept at identifying physical locations for its PR events that lend it legitimacy and prestige.

Attendance was by invitation only, and the audience included academics (including this author), various MPs from the British parliament and other local dignitaries. The event began with a smart, non-alcoholic drinks reception, hosted by various members of the DS. Professional photographers captured conversations on camera for later dissemination on the DS website. The showing of the film itself was followed by a question-and-answer session with its director.

*Love is a Verb* is a glossy and well-researched production, featuring some fascinating video and photographic footage of Fethullah Gülen's early career as an imam and public preacher in Turkey. It is obvious, however, that the film was made for a foreign audience that is largely unfamiliar with the intricacies of Turkish Islam and its relationship to the state, rather than a domestic one which would be acutely aware of those intricacies. Accordingly, the film's narrative is extremely idealistic. It tells the story of an army of selfless volunteers, inspired by a Sufic interpretation of Islam and motivated by the altruistic requirements of their Muslim faith to bring education and healthcare to poor and war-ridden

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<sup>33</sup> Caroline Tee, "The Gülen Movement and the AK Party: The Rise and Fall of a Turkish Islamist Alliance." In Yavuz and Balci, op. cit.

societies such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Somalia and Iraq. There are some very veiled references to the political situation in Turkey, the tensions surrounding the role of religion in public life, and indeed to the controversies surrounding the amount of power and influence that is yielded by Gülen and his followers there, but these issues are not explored in any depth. When asked at the end of the screening whether there were any plans to show the film in Turkey, the DS host responded in the negative, indicating that the film had been made for an international audience and that the information contained within it would already be 'obvious' to many Turkish viewers.

In fact, any Turkish viewer of *Love is a Verb* would recognise that the narrative being told of the GM was entirely one-sided. The image of the GM that the film presented was of an apolitical Muslim movement characterised by charity, hard work and heroic self-sacrifice. Certainly, these are important aspects of the movement, and it is true that Gülen's collection of dedicated followers have played a major role in his success through their extraordinary commitment and work ethic. However, the GM is surely more complex – and certainly wealthier and more powerful – than the film's one-dimensional narrative seems to suggest. To the audience in London, however, who made various expressions of support for the film in the Q&A session, the narrative was apparently compelling.

In a similar vein to the materials produced by Quilliam, *Love is a Verb* fed directly into the narrative of 'moderate Islam' that has gained such currency since 9/11 and 7/7. The film is highly idealised and selective in its account of the GM, and of its representation of Islam. As Mamdani has shown, the weakness of the 'good Muslim'/'bad Muslim' paradigm lies partly in its inability to view Muslims as individuals with full human agency. Rather, it posits Islam as a static and monolithic category with the capacity for action in its own right. In reality, as anthropologists of Islam have recognised, it is more accurate to admit that Islam exists primarily in the lives, practices and beliefs of Muslims, rather than as an immutable or ahistorical essence. Islam is therefore subject to considerable local



and regional variation, of change over time and, on occasion, of internal contradiction.<sup>34</sup>

The point I wish to make here is not that the GM's documentary film is a wholesale distortion of the truth, and that it was deliberately intended to mislead its British audience. Rather, I am suggesting that, because of the keen appetite for evidence of 'moderate' Islam and its enactment in Britain today, the movement's self representation in *Love is a Verb* was subject to less critical scrutiny than it could or should have been. In consuming the narrative of 'good Islam', the audience of *Love is a Verb* was encouraged to overlook the historical, political and cultural factors that have shaped the genesis and emergence of the GM in 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkey. Therefore, what was on show was an idealised depiction of an essentialised religious tradition, rather than contextualised stories of individual human agents with conflicting loyalties and complex motivations.

### ***DEFENDING GÜLEN IN THE POST-COUP ERA***

In the aftermath of the corruption scandal that broke in December 2013, it became clear that relations between the GM and the AK Party had irreparably broken down. The movement had apparently been intent on fatally damaging the democratically elected government through subversive use of wiretapping on ministerial telephones. In 2013, however, this state of affairs attracted relatively little interest outside Turkey and the GM's global image remained largely untarnished by its questionable political machinations at home. As of 15 July 2016, however, the picture is very different. The war between the GM and the AK Party has made headline news around the world, and the movement has since been under considerable pressure to defend itself against allegations of serious crimes.

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<sup>34</sup> Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam." *Occasional Papers Series*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986. See also Abdul Hamid El-Zein, "Between Ideology and Theology: A Search for the Anthropology of Islam." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 6 (1977): 227–54.

The violence and audacity of the attack on July 15 came as a profound shock to Turkish citizens and international observers of Turkey alike, and even those who were aware of the complexities of the GM's relationship to political power, and the escalating crisis in its relationship with the governing AK Party, were not expecting it to mount a sudden and violent military assault on civilian targets. Therefore, to the international audience who had consumed an insider narrative about Gülen and his followers before July 2016, the accusations against him understandably appeared outlandish and preposterous.<sup>35</sup>

In the USA, the movement has capitalised on the cohort of influential supporters who have been willing to speak out in its defence. These voices have become a significant part of the GM's strategy in the post-coup era, and a potentially powerful counter-challenge to President Erdoğan's demands for Gülen's extradition. A prominent example from the US context is an article written by Mark Juergensmeyer, an eminent professor of religious studies and sociology at the University of California, in January 2017.<sup>36</sup> The article is based on a meeting the author had with Gülen at his Pennsylvania home. In it, Juergensmeyer talks about the movement as the victim of persecution from the Turkish authorities, and draws a hyperbolic parallel between Gülen and the Dalai Lama. While he admits he has no way of accurately assessing the charges facing the GM, the author declares that, 'considering his relative isolation in his woodsy retreat with little or no apparent organizational structure around him, it seems hard to imagine him plotting an intricate coup attempt on the other side of the world.' Such a statement evidences the serious gap in Juergensmeyer's judgement, as – regardless of whether or not they were used for nefarious ends on the night in question – it is commonly recognised that the GM commands considerable resources all around the world, and maintains tightknit transnational networks that extend Gülen's power and influence well beyond his compound in Pennsylvania. What the intervention by Juergensmeyer, who is not a specialist

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<sup>35</sup> The international response to the crisis was largely dominated by criticism of Erdoğan's heavy-handed response, and was somewhat slow to condemn the coup plotters. This led to serious frustration amongst many parts of the domestic audience.

<sup>36</sup> Juergensmeyer, *op. cit.*

on Turkey, shows very powerfully is that the GM's longstanding investment in strategic PR can now potentially pay dividends as its battle with the Turkish authorities plays itself out in the public domain.

The debate surrounding Gülen's extradition is understandably taking place primarily in the USA, where he is resident. There have been no media articles along the lines of Juergensmeyer's by British academics or public figures.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, in the UK discussions surrounding the allegations have been rather more nuanced, and there is a degree of scepticism in political circles about the GM's protestations of innocence. In December 2016, the movement was invited to give evidence at the Houses of Parliament on the subject of the failed coup, as part of a Foreign Affairs Committee report on the UK's relations with Turkey. It was represented by the Chairperson of the DS, Özcan Keleş, as well as one of the most senior members of the movement, Yüksel Alp Aslandoğan, who is based in the USA and on occasion acts as Gülen's spokesperson.<sup>38</sup> As the institution chosen to represent the GM, the DS evidenced its ability to engage comfortably with the legislative processes of British politics: the arguments put forward by Keleş and Aslandoğan were confident, articulate and well rehearsed. However, the committee's report found the evidence of the GM's pivotal role in the coup was inconclusive, and it noted that, "the explanations provided to us by the Gülenists did not resolve our uncertainties about the fundamental nature and motives of their movement".<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Publications in the academic style that clearly support Gülen are, however, still going to press in the UK. In 2017 Bloomsbury Academic published Simon Robinson's *The Spirituality of Responsibility*, in which the author acknowledges that it was written with guidance from members of the DS and almost entirely ignores the current scandal surrounding Gülen.

<sup>38</sup> The oral evidence that they gave can be viewed online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xi9vwD8-mRo> (accessed 16 November 2017). Written evidence can be found at <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/foreign-affairs-committee/uks-relations-with-turkey/written/42795.pdf> (accessed 16 November 2017).

<sup>39</sup> "The UK's Relations with Turkey" House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, 25 March 2017, p.36. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmffaff/615/615.pdf> (accessed 17 November 2017).

Nevertheless, the movement has continued to pursue the same strategic audience for public relations activities since the coup, and still commands a faithful support base. It has drawn on its earlier strategy of utilising physical sites that are inscribed with legitimacy, and has recently started holding invitation-only lunchtime meetings in a location on Whitehall, less than half a mile from Downing Street and the British seat of government at Westminster. At one such meeting that this author attended in the summer of 2017, the subject of discussion was the coup and its aftermath, and the invited guests comprised other academics as well as a faith leader from the Christian Church and various local civic leaders. A presentation was made by a senior member of the DS, which laid out very comprehensively the GM's legal defence in light of the coup allegations. The reception of this presentation was broadly positive, and there were no vocal detractors amongst the invited guests.

The event replicated many of the features of the movement's PR activities that existed before the coup: it consisted of a select group of strategic invitees; it foregrounded an insider perspective on the GM; and it was held in a highly symbolic location. Like the conference launch event at the House of Lords, and the film premiere in Leicester Square, the roundtable lunch meeting on Whitehall took on an extra dimension because of the potent symbolism of the physical space that it occupied. The event was, however, limited to only a handful of attendees, and was therefore more limited in scope than the larger events of the pre-coup era that were narrated above. The observation is tentative, but it is possible that the seizure of many material assets belonging to the GM in Turkey since July 2016 is limiting the resources available to its global franchises. If this is the case, then it can be expected that the movement's PR activities in the near future will be less lavishly funded than they were in the past.

Lastly, the GM has increased the levels of transparency surrounding its various activities. In 2017 it established the Sohbet Society, which describes itself as 'a non-profit organisation providing religious learning and spiritual activities for

Muslims',<sup>40</sup> and offers regular reading groups and mentoring amongst other services. GM *sohbet* groups (discussion groups focusing on the Qur'an and its interpretation, and the works of Gülen) have not previously been open to general Muslim publics in this way, but rather have been operated by informal invitations to participate within closed GM networks.<sup>41</sup> The decision to openly advertise *sohbet* groups through digital media represents a new move towards greater transparency for the movement, and is part of its response to the allegations that it harbours hidden agendas. It remains unclear what level of take up these groups have had over the past months, and whether the move towards online accessibility to all will alter the demographic of GM *sohbet* groups, which have always been almost exclusively Turkish in composition.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

As the movement faces a new and uncertain future in the post-coup era, the credibility it has built up in strategic circles in the West seem likely to serve it well. Its assets and activities in Turkey have been comprehensively dismantled, and it seems highly unlikely that the GM will be able to rebuild itself in its homeland. In addition, its international schools are also under threat, and numerous countries have already given way to pressure from the Turkish government to either close them or transfer their ownership elsewhere. Thousands of Gülen's close followers are now being detained in Turkey or living in exile abroad and, with his extradition still being actively pursued, their leader's own fate hangs in the balance. Yet because of nearly two decades of investment in strategic engagement in Western nations such as the UK, the GM is well positioned today to take its fight with President Erdoğan to the public arena of international discourse, where in some quarters it holds valuable sway. As the Juergensmeyer article powerfully illustrates, the movement can draw on an

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<sup>40</sup> <http://www.sohbetsociety.org/about-us> (accessed 10 November 2017).

<sup>41</sup> Smita Tewari Jassal, "The Sohbet: Talking Islam in Turkey." *Sociology of Islam* 1, no. 3-4 (2014): 188-208. See also Fabio Vicini, "Pedagogies of Affection: The Role of Exemplariness and Emulation in Learning Processes - Extracurricular Islamic Education in the Fethullah Gülen Community in Istanbul." *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (2013): 381-98.

influential audience for high-profile endorsement. Notwithstanding the ambivalence of the 2016 House of Commons report on the coup, this strategic support base may yet prove to be the GM's most valuable asset over the coming months and years.

For as long as Western audiences consume the artificial and dichotomous narrative of 'good Muslim' versus 'bad Muslim', which has gained considerable traction in the post-9/11 world, such support for the GM seems likely to endure. This narrative has failed us on many levels, not least by failing to recognise the location of Islamic ideologies and activities within particular social, political and temporal contexts. In the case of the GM, this narrative has obscured understanding of its historical origins and its relationship to secularism and state power in Turkey. In the post-coup era, it has created confusion about its intentions and capabilities. It is therefore to be hoped that future analyses of the movement will move away from this dichotomous approach, and will study it as the complex and multifaceted product of its own culture, geography and time that it actually is.

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